

February 10, 2017

Dear Chairpersons of the Appropriations Committee
Senator Osten, Senator Formica and Representative Walker and Committee
Members:

Family Resource Center model builds upon the basics; families, neighborhoods and academics to support an integrated approach focused upon stronger families. Every FRC operates as a system of partnerships between the school and other community resources to promote the development of a shared vision across community, agencies and services.

Family Resource Centers are not 'a program' but rather a system of direct services and collaborations that do not duplicate services but rather streamlines and builds capacity to existing services while providing a single point of contact for families within their schools regardless of race, ethnicity or socio-economic status within a school. By using local public school buildings and resources, Family Resource Centers, with the collaboration of the school system, are able to better prepare children and families for success.

I am the Coordinator of the Plainville Family Resource Network (PFRN) and would like to share the following stories to best describe the work of Family Resource Centers in Plainville and throughout CT . . .

- One PFRN family initially came to the program due to the mother's need for increased English language fluency. She had a goal of improving skills needed for employment. Once she enrolled in the PFRN Adult Education classes, her children participated in language immersion Play & Learn Groups (which Mom attended with them when not in class.) PFRN staff assisted the family with community resources community and referrals for energy/ food assistance. Mom was guided with issues of available transportation and possible future training/employment possibilities. Both children demonstrated the need for more structure, and their mother worked with parent educators to introduce routine in the family schedule and reasonable expectations for behavior in the home. The older child was approaching Kindergarten age and needed additional support in developing self-regulation and social skills. PFRN staff helped Mom enroll him in the School Readiness Class. This helped him increase many necessary skills, and become more socially adept. Through ideas and activities the mother gained through Families in Training/Parents as Teachers (PAT) groups and

personal visits, her children increased their verbalization and their home had increased literacy opportunities. Mom came to trust the program staff, giving her the resolve to confide in them months later when she was involved as a victim of domestic violence. She revealed her situation and emotional distress, not knowing what she could or should do. A parent educator helped with both immediate and long-term solutions and with referrals for safe shelter and material needs for the woman and her family. Through this support, this family has been able to be resilient and move forward with hope. This woman shared her appreciation of PFRN with the parent educator, for literacy support and all the help she has received for daily living challenges. “It means the world to me,” she said.

- This story began with a referral by a first grade teacher who recognized the importance of the family resource center’s role as a “bridge” between home and school. Knowing that one of her students had two younger siblings (ages 19 months and 4 years) and seemed to be having difficulty with parenting, she gave our program information to his parents at Linden’s Fall Open House, encouraging them to call us. It was not long before this mom came to a “Play & Learn” Group with her children, while her older son attended class in the same school. Seeing how much her sons were benefitting from school readiness learning opportunities and social interaction, this family soon began attending almost every day. When different challenges arose with her children, mom eagerly engaged with PFRN parent educators, as the rapport established allowed her to feel comfortable and accept helpful information. Both boys were screened on a regular basis throughout the year, using Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) and for the older son, Plainville’s three-year old developmental screen. P.A.T. personal visits provided time for follow-up to the ASQ questionnaires, with suggestions provided to the family for home activities to strengthen areas that needed boosting. Close collaboration with the school’s Special Education Department allowed for observation visits during regular group times, and additional screening and consultation for issues of concern. This was especially beneficial for their child who was approaching Kindergarten entry. As the year progressed, the family continued to attend regular sessions of adult/child interactive Play & Learn sessions. Staff observed the results as Mom’s knowledge base broadened through Families in Training. She employed many new parenting skills and had increased involvement with the learning activities, as she increased in understanding how they helped with school preparation. The children were more receptive

to her guidance and she exhibited a calmer control. The boys also developed more focused play skills and were better able to attend to circle time and participated in daily literacy activities. Mom also took advantage of several offerings including “Raising Readers Parent Book Club” and “Conscious Discipline®” Parenting Series. In addition, mother and children participated in family field trips and enrichment programs offered by the PFRN, such as “Fabulous Frogs” at the Nature Center, Child-Centered Tour at an Art Museum, visit by a dental hygienist, family nutrition program, Family Zumba Night, and school wide Family Science Night. They also benefited from weekly creative art activities and the availability of books and resources from the PFRN Lending Library, Resource and Referral Services were well utilized as well. Information on medical care, assistance with fuel costs, nutrition, recreation activities, and additional parenting programs in the community were just some of those shared. On the last day of this year’s session, Mom revealed that the family was expecting a new baby. As Parents as Teachers Program begins with prenatal screening and visits, this new little one will be off to a good start!

- This story is actually many stories . . .
As our program has seen an increase of families with relatives/grandparents as the main caregivers for infants, toddlers and preschoolers (many being at-risk and high-risk) have been able to find much needed support through our Family Resource Center. Many of these families utilize other community resources and programs provided by the PFRN. Not only do these caregivers and their families benefit, but most importantly, the children benefit from having the opportunity to build a strong foundation in all areas of development needed for academic success.
- It is always challenging to choose which “story” to illustrate the impact our program has had on a family. Should we choose the young widow with a “clingy” toddler who has learned to provide a nurturing home while fostering independence for her child? Or choose the parent who told us privately of social anxiety that prevented her from going places? Sparked by the love of her child, and knowing the program would be good for his social/academic growth, she came regularly to Play & Learn Groups and other group connections. It was amazing to see the positive changes in both mother and child by the year’s end! This story however, is that of “Girl A” illustrating how PFRN programs helped this preschool child and her family.

Girl A., who will be called “Alice”, was a withdrawn preschooler with very little prior experience interacting with her peers. Her mother had major challenges from clinical depression, domestic abuse, another child with autism and the strong possibility of divorce and disruption. She had been referred to The PFRN by a concerned alumni parent. Mother and Alice began attending, sporadically at first but attendance increased as they became more comfortable. Through the rapport built over time, Mother began to open up the PFRN Staff and take advantage of many opportunities offered through our Resource and Referral component. Parents as Teachers personal visits helped her understand how negative and anxious statements were affecting her child. Staff encouraged mental and physical health care, including counseling. Play & Learn Group became a stabilizing point in both their lives. Social connections were made for both mother and child, and Alice began to blossom. Screening through ASQ questionnaires helped reveal areas of strength and those that needed boosting. This helped Mother to learn age-appropriate ways to encourage Alice, and see the advantages of her beginning a formal preschool program. PFRN Staff helped Alice become enrolled in a school readiness program as a role model student, where she began to thrive. Several social service agencies and medical/mental health providers now support Mother. She also knows, as do all our “alumni” families, that she always be connected to The Plainville Family Resource Network, to help her family find the resources and support they need.

- The increased number of grandparents raising grandchildren has not lessened the challenges for those individuals who are managing this responsibility, and the children they care for. The examples used in this story highlight the positive effects the family resource center components can have, and how the Plainville Family Resource Network has used them to make a meaningful difference for this family.

“Lacey” began the program this year as an adorable and precocious three-year-old in the custody of her maternal grandmother. Her early years had been tumultuous, with much uncertainty regarding living arrangements and guardianship. Neglect, substance abuse and mental health issues had been factors shadowing her earliest years, until Lacey was removed from her mother and placed in the care of the state. Though Lacey does not remember her infancy and toddlerhood, the neglect she experienced has produced a lack of secure attachment. Of concern are a display of “indiscriminate affection” and a constant need for attention for adults. These tendencies had

prevented the child from relationships with peers and caused her to primarily seek out adults for companionship and conversation. She resisted play with other children.

Although “Grammy” originally came to our program for her granddaughter’s benefit, her own multiple needs were discovered through the rapport and trust built with PFRN parent educators at Play & Learn group meetings. Grammy had multiple health issues and a physical disability. She also helped in the care of an elderly parent as well as Lacey’s on-going needs. PFRN staff members were able to assist Lacey during Play & Learn, facilitating play sequences with other children, and modeling for Lacey as to how to join in play. They were able to get down on the floor with her at circle time to help her engage and develop the ability to focus on the learning activities and story time. Once this routine was established, she was better able to engage in this time with her grandmother, for their mutual benefit. The PFRN Lending Library also provided books and other learning materials for them to enjoy at home together.

Grammy and Lacey took advantage of Play & Learn groups, and the many family field trips and in-classroom experiences offered this year by the PFRN. During these, friendly associations were formed with other families, an important resiliency factor. Parent educators guided Grammy through the process of Developmental Screening. As a result, Lacey, having turned four this summer, is registered to begin Plainville’s Four-year-Old Preschool Program, complete with transportation, in the fall.

Utilizing the Resource and Referral component and community collaborations, PFRN was able to assist this family when a housing crisis occurred. Resources were also shared regarding food programs, health care and recreational resources and adult education opportunities. During the holiday time, the family received many free toys and games for Lacey.

Another crisis occurred during the year when an anonymous child abuse report was made against this grandmother. Although the charges were not substantiated following an investigation, the event provided a catalyst for change. Lacey’s grandmother sought help from the PFRN, admitting how overwhelmed she had become at home. Advocacy for additional resources and support from state agencies was also initiated.

Through the following months, and many meetings, formally and informally with parent educators, this overwhelmed grandmother began to develop a better understanding of her granddaughter's whole development, age appropriate expectations, and positive discipline and guidance strategies. She is scheduled to begin a multi-session parenting workshop series, Conscious Discipline, to begin in fall. Lacey and her family will continue to partner with The Plainville Family Resource Network in the upcoming school year.

Knowing that positive experiences and community support can help children succeed in spite of early adverse experiences, The PFRN remains a committed resource for Lacey's and other families in our town.

- At the beginning of the school year, a great grandmother enrolled in playgroup for the first time with her 19-month old great grandson. Fortunately, she read about the Plainville Family Resource Network programs in the Adult Education Booklet sent to all Plainville residents. This included an invitation to our annual Grandparents Breakfast which she and her husband attended and mentioned to us that she had concerns about her great grandson's development. They were unable to obtain services to support the child or family due to their unique shared living arrangements. The child lived with the great grandparents Monday through Friday in Plainville and was only with his parents on the weekends in Stafford causing difficulty in getting services through the Birth to Three program in which he was enrolled. With our interventions and Birth to Three contacts, we were able to assist the family in receiving the services the child needed. We were able to provide a flexible setting which enabled the child to gradually become more comfortable interacting with other children and tolerating a more stimulating environment. The Birth to Three provider was able to observe and work with him during and after play & learn group sessions at the PFRN. The great grandparents were supported with Parents As Teachers personal visits and resources from our lending library. Noticeable improvements were made throughout the year through these interventions and the child is now starting to recognize and observe his peers.

I hope these stories provided an understanding of how the integrated services of the FRC come together to support families. We must continue to invest in our future and fund 74 Family Resource Centers throughout CT!

Sincerely,

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